

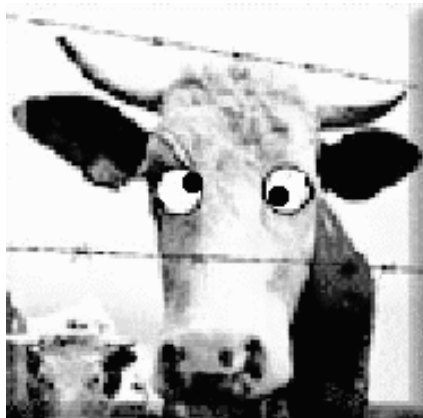
# DAPHNIA FIGHTS BACK

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## ONE

‘But, what happens when she’s your Juliet but you’re not her Romeo?’

-unknown

THE FAT CROW IS A ‘BIG BOY.’ I mean he’s really a big boy, and he’s fighting me. He throws a punch. I dodge it. He throws two more quick punches at me. I step back. All I have to do is stay out of his range. His arms are longer than mine, and he’s just as quick. If he lands a punch he’ll knock me out. I have fought him before, and I know his weakness. He throws another punch. It’s close to my face. If it had been an inch closer, my nose would be gushing blood. I get lucky. He has overextended himself. I get one quick rabbit punch in with my left hand. There are ribs there, but I don’t think it’s hard enough to break one of them. He’s got one more punch in him. He crosses with his own left. I jump back. The fight is over. The Fat Crow is out of breath.

He’s over six feet five inches tall, a good three hundred-fifty pounds. And luckily, for me he has asthma. His asthma is immense as

he is large. He puts his hand up to postpone the fight. I have always thought he looks like the original Mexican Bob's Big Boy.

The Crow goes to his knees. I could finish him off, but instead. I give him my hand. I hold it out and wait for him. He's catching his breath. He'll be okay; I hope. I ask, "Where's your inhaler?"

He remembers he has one. It's in his pants pocket. The Fat Crow takes it out and takes a puff on it. He reaches up, and I help him to his feet. I'm strong, but it takes all my strength to get him standing up. That's the hardest part of this workout.

"What are you going to do with the rest of your day?" he asks being friendly, but his voice always sounds like gravel.

"I don't know."

"I bet you are going to see Juliet."

"Shut up," I say.

"Why are you blushing?" The Crow has a way of seeing through people. "She's pretty. I don't blame you for liking her. I wished I like someone as beautiful as her. You're lucky."

I look at my feet. If this were a fight, the Crow would be landing the punches now. Darn him.

He starts quoting some old poem at me, "At this same ancient feast of Capulet's. Sups the fair Juliet whom thou so lovest, with all the admired beauties of Verona: go thither; and, with an untrained eye, compare her face with some that I shall show, and I will make thee think thy swan a crow."

Not fair using words at me. I am vulnerable. He's landed the knockout punch with them. I think I might have even staggered backward. It's not fair; who is quoting?

"It's okay, cousin. We have all been in love."

Yes, he's a relative of mine. My aunt's oldest.

My family is sad. Especially about Rudy. He's my little brother, and now he was in a federal prison. A ten years sentence. It could've been longer, but Smokey and I spoke up for him in court. Had I done enough? Nope. Had I promised my grandmother I would find a way and set him free? Yes, I did. Did my grandmother ask when I would

set him free? At first, almost every day. Now, she doesn't ask any longer. Did she still expect me to keep my promise? Yes.

While the Fat Crow, sort of looks like a crow. He wears black clothes all the time. He even wears a black baseball cap with a large crow on it. I don't know where he got it, but he's had it on his head for the last year. He likes shiny things. He always wears silver necklaces. He also likes to repeat things.

He pats me on the back, and he makes his way out of the gym. He says to me before he leaves, "I'll see you later, Cuz."

I have a date with the prettiest girl I know. It's Juliet, and she's gorgeous, but she's always late. Where did we meet? We met at one of the only few places where I don't have to deal with the Auxiliary Hero Corps. That's church. Sunday mornings aren't always the easiest because Saturday night is the finish of my long work week, but I hadn't slept by the time I went to church.

I also get Mondays off from the Corps, and this afternoon, I'm waiting for her. It's nice out, and I'm heading to Library Square, but I have forgotten something. Spike is still on my chest. Who is Spike? He's my dog, my tattoo dog, and he comes to life when I touch him. Juliet hasn't had a chance to meet him. I figured it might be best to wait to introduce him to you now.

It's a rare winter day, and the sun is still out. I didn't know what the two of us would end up doing, but I didn't care. I just liked being around her. Yup, I'm in love.

It's my day off. I'm a member the Auxiliary Hero Corps. Who are we? Are we superheroes? Not yet. We're in training. The minor leagues. Some will make it to the Hero Corps, but most of us won't. I still have my chance.

My brother, he'll never get another chance? He had his chance. He betrayed us. He became a traitor. Rudy made his bed with another traitorous villain, Daphnia. While she remained free, my brother remained in jail. Am I going to get him free of his prison? Yes, I am. I will get him out of jail because I made a promise to my grandmother. I always keep my word. But my grandmother also knows I

have the heart of a hero. I'll get Rudy free the right way, the legal way. But lately, I have thought maybe that isn't the best way to set my brother free? There were other. Much faster ways of doing it. I don't know what to do.

I walk by Satan's Grove. It's dark and creepy. I have a hard time looking in there. I have never really been in there. It's next to the park where I'm going to meet Juliet, and it's a part of the city that has never been developed. I hear a voice, it's an evil one, but I want to walk towards it. I think I also see a pair of yellow eyes, but they disappear. Were they animal eyes? I don't know. I want to step in there. Something is drawing me inside. I take a few steps. What's in there? I almost feel I'm in a dream.

I feel a hand grab my shoulder. "Don't go in there, Cuz...only evil lurks in there. Are you dumb enough to go in there?" It's the Crow's raspy voice. He must've followed me from the gym. "Haven't you heard about this place? You lose everything if you go in there."

"Of course I have," I say.

"Then don't go in," says the Crow. "You don't want to go where the Snare lives...isn't your lady waiting for you?"

The Crow says something that surprises me. "I hate to lose a real hero. I know in my heart you're going to be a Flyer someday. When I was a kid, I also wanted to be a Flyer, but I know that's never going to happen. I see it in you. I know a Flyer when I see one."

"I'm not a hockey player. I don't think the Philadelphia Flyers will ever draft me." I knew what he means, but as I try to make a bad joke. I never pictured myself as a Flyer. That's the rarest kind of hero. Will, I fly? It's only a daydream. I know what I forgot to do. I'm supposed to meet Smokey. I snap out of my daydream, and I remember Juliet. I can still meet Smokey, but it will have to be quick. I say, "You're right. But first I have to go."

I leave the Fat Crow. I run across the street. I turn back to look at him. I'm not sure, but I think I see him step into the grove. A truck passes me, and I'm really late. Smokey gets angry when I'm late. I run even faster.



## TWO

"Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage like a chicken."

-Colonel Harlan S. Sanders

"WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR FACE?" asks Smokey. The man is big and he likes his flannel. He has always had a beard, but not the kind of beard that is fashionable now. His looks like a raccoon is living on his face. He's a bear without his power, and he's also a bear with it. That's what he literally turns into a bear. A big brown one. Smokey is half-man, half-bear, and I know I like the bear better than the man. He's in man form now, too bad.

"Nothing has happened to my face. What do you mean?" I say turning to see him behind me.

"It's just that you...there's something. Something, I haven't seen before of that ugly mug of yours, Val. Something I thought I have never seen on your face. What is it?" Smokey is smiling, and he walks around the bench, and he sits next to me.

"What? What do I have on my face?" I ask as I touch it with my right hand.

Smokey takes his meaty finger and touches me right on my sweet part of my sour puss. "It's right there. I have seen this before. But you got it bad. You got it real bad, kid." He's smiling at me with his grizzly grin. Valentine Vega, you're in love...it's love. You've got it bad. There's love all over your face. Who's the unlucky girl?"

"You don't know her," I say. I'm being truthful.

Smokey gets serious and is having one of his Deliverance movie moments, at least he hasn't asked me to 'Squeal like a pig!' Smokey can be frightening, but for now, he was on my side. I could use you there's something going on, and I can use your help."

"I have no other reason to be here, but I'm not working today. I'm meeting my girl in a few minutes. There's nothing else I want to do."

"The girl I don't know. That's a pity, Val. We used to be close. Smokey just smiles at me. He says, "Sometimes you act just like a Flyer." Smokey gets up and walks away from me. I hope he believes me when I told him I'm there to meet Juliet. He says one last thing to me "I still work for the Corps, and some of us still have a job to do. I could use your help when you're done with your girl."

I say to myself, "What do you know? Old Bear, you wouldn't know a Flyer if he swooped down and took your toupee off your head." I look and see Smokey. Has he followed me here? Our eyes meet, but he walks away. Where is he going? I continue to wait on the bench. It's now time for the office workers to leave the sunshine and return to the artificial light of their cubicles. I didn't have that kind of job. I work outside, and I work at night. Smokey goes over and starts talking to two police officers.

Smokey is still talking to the same cops. More cops. And some of them are in their riot gear. Something is going down. I'm surprised by Smokey because the Corps and the Cops are not traditionally friends. Both groups don't like each other, but today they seem to like working with each other.

Juliet isn't here yet. Has she forgotten about me? Am I too late?

Am I'm doomed to sit on this bench for the rest of my life? I know my heart is going to break.

"Hi, Sweet Cheeks. Have you been here long," says the woman I'm not waiting for. It's Daphnia. But she's not dressed the way I'm expecting. She dressed as a park's employee. I almost could mistake her for one. The last time I saw her she had run away from me at the Vogue Theater. She had killed my friend, Old Hippie. She looks at my face, and says, "Move over Cutie Pie. I know I'm allergic to polyester. I hate the smell...oh, for the unenlightened they think I just go out with a care in the world. But I put a lot of thought into this look. In fact, I put way too much thought into this little meeting of ours."

I still don't know what to say to her.

"It's a good thing you're so good-looking because sometimes you don't have a lot to say. It's okay. Just sit there and listen. I don't have much time." She touches my palm with her hand. It sends electricity through me. "You need to leave the Corps. It's too dangerous. Things are changing in this city, and the Corps can't see what is really going on. You're in danger, and you don't know it."

I say, "I'm not joining you. I didn't join you before. I won't change my mind now. Not after what you let happen to Rudy."

"I miss Rudy too. Don't get me wrong, but I've only come to warn you. Don't you think I'm going to risk my neck for the Corps? The police? Smokey? I've come here because of you? You're my friend. You don't know what's going on. This isn't a good time to be a part of the team. This is a good time to be a free agent. A lone wolf."

I look, there are more police arriving. Smokey is still helping orchestrate their lines. I wondered how he would feel if he knew the woman he is looking for is sitting right next to me. There are more people. Is this a protest? A rally? "What's going on?"

"I'm leaving. The only thing that's going to take place here is evil and chaos, but I'm its conductor. I'm only a minor player. People are going to die today."

"Why would you do this?"

"I've only thrown a little fuel on the fire. The flames were already

burning when I showed up. You would be surprised how little a small fire it takes at first to burn down a house. It only takes the smallest flame," says Daphnia. She stands up. Adjust her shirt. When satisfied she says, "It's time for me to leave. Please don't be heartbroken when I'm gone."

Daphnia walks away. Smokey is so close. I could have her arrested. I don't know. She was my friend, and I've always had a schoolboy crush on her. I let her walk away. That's the way we did things in my neighborhood. It's not a good excuse, but I don't care. She had been my friend, and I would never hand her over to the Cops.

But I still need to warn Smokey about the riot. I didn't want him to get hurt by Daphnia. I turn to look Daphnia. She's left. She's disappeared in the crowd of her people. All the police are now dressed in riot gear. The mob is starting to pick up any easy weapons they can find in the square. There's going to be a fight. Two armies are going to clash here, and all I can think about is finding my Juliet.

## THREE

‘Come loving...give me my Romeo’

“YOU’RE LATE, but I’m glad you’re safe. I was worried about you.”  
I say.

Juliet kisses me.

I kiss her back.

“What took you so long? I don’t know if I can forgive you for being so late,” I say.

“I’m sorry the day has escaped me...and Spike? Is he here?” She digs her hand underneath my shirt and places it on my chest. It’s the best feeling in the world. I don’t answer. Instead, I give her another kiss. Who knew I had another in me?

“That’s starting to make things better, but I only have a few minutes left in my lunch.” Juliet works for the Parks Department. She’s a horticulturist. She’s smart. “In a few minutes I have a meeting...the landscape architects have plans for the park. We’re looking to expanded it. A new pavilion...with walking paths. It’s going to make this space a jewel of the city again.”

"That's interesting." I really don't care. I try to kiss her again. I say "That's not very fair. It's not my fault you're late."

She looks into my eyes, and says, "Too many things are going on, but I will make it up to you tonight."

"But I have the rest of the day off. I thought maybe you could leave early and we could go someplace else," I say trying to look as gorgeous as possible." I know it's a losing battle, but sometimes even those battles need to be fought.

"That's not fair. My job is in the day, your's is at night."

"Maybe, I should go with you. There are some angry people here, and I don't want anything happening to you."

"They're not mad at me. People come to the park and protest all of the time," she says. She sighs, "I really don't want to go, but it's important."

I've lost...it's time to gather my troops and fall back. "Maybe after the meeting. I can pick you up. We could get something to eat and then maybe we can think of something else to keep us busy."

"Maybe...but now, I really have to go."

I watch her leave. Some women you never want to take your eyes off of them and Juliet is one of them. I stare at her as long as I can. I thought I might die when I lost sight of her. She nearly killed me by leaving, but I still managed to struggle through her absence.

"All you Romeos are exactly the same. They always think they're the first to be in love...and no one in the world knows how they feel."

It's Queen Mab. She looks at me with a very disapproving look.

"But?"

"But nothing. Queen Mab now needs your help."

"But it's my day off."

The large black woman takes my hand and pulls me along. Queen Mab used to be a man but not any longer. She used to be called Mercutio Jones, but that has changed along with her. We are getting closer to the line of protesters. She speaks louder so I can hear her, "Heroes don't get days off. Queen Mab doesn't get any days off

and neither do you. The party has already started and we're late. You know how I hate being late to parties."

This is not the girl I wanted to spend my afternoon with.

## FOUR

‘Romeo and Juliet killed themselves for their love, so I think you can at least reply to my text.’

-A text overseen in the back-row of a freshman language arts class at William Jefferson Clinton High School or was it Twitter?

QUEEN MAB IS one of the first to pick up a beer bottle and throw it at the police. It doesn't reach them, but it breaks a few feet in front of their line. I know Mab. She's a big woman. I guess he's a she now. Now, her name is Queen Mab. She's younger than me and went to school with my two older sisters. She's also angry, but after she throws the bottle she retreats behind other protesters. The rest of the rioters are picking up any other objects they can throw.

I yell at her, “What are you doing?” Queen Mab doesn't care.

The police are in full riot gear. They are wearing protective helmets and are carrying shields. The police have formed their own line. They are advancing forward with slow steps. Some of the police are banging their nightsticks against the shields and it makes an intimidating sound. The police don't care if the situation escalates



and they are looking forward to crossing the park and engaging the other side.

I'm in a bad spot. I need to get out of here. I get hit by a rock. Luckily, it mostly strings. It's a small one and it hits me in my shoulder. I look around, and I see a safe spot to get out-of-the-way. There's a gazebo across fifty yards of lawn with a bike path behind me.

"Val." It's Queen Mab. She motions me to come to her. I don't want to go. I look to the other battle line and see Smoky. He's changed into his full bear form. He's full of fur, and he's ready for a fight.

Smoke grenades. They're flying into the air. One lands at my feet. I go to Mab. She's waiting for me.

The rioters launch another volley of rocks and garbage. I'm running towards Mab. This time, they don't hit me.

The police return a volley of their own. Rubber bullets. They aren't meant to kill, but they still hurt when they hit me. One hits me in my calf. One hits me in my back. I start to stumble, but it didn't knock me down. Mab is in front of me. The big woman reaches out for me.

With the dark skin of her big arm, she reaches around me and helps guide me to a safer area. "Daphnia has sure stirred up the hornet's nest today. Hasn't she?"

"So have you. You've added fuel to the fire," I say. I don't need her help, but Mab insists. The first row of rioters passes us.

They say, "It's time for a change. It's time we mattered in our city." I couldn't hear anything else she says to me. The noise is too loud. There's too much going on all around us. Smoke fills the air. Mab is still talking, and I finally hear her say, "This city ignores the poor. They ignore everyone who doesn't have an address. They ignore the people who go to work every day but live in poverty. We tired of being ignored. It's time we are heard. That's why we came here. We came to listen to Daphnia today, but the police want to arrest her. We can't let that happen."

I hear the megaphone voice of a police officer and he tells

everyone to leave the park. He tells everyone they will be arrested. It's too late. The violence has gone too far. Daphnia has thrown her match on a dry powder keg and it has exploded in our face. I know Daphnia, and I'm pretty sure she's no longer here. She likes to pull strings, and over the past few months of her hiding, she's kept a very low profile. These people have listened to her. Daphnia had been busy since that night when the Corps had to stop her, killed the super-villains the Beat and the Blackshirt, and arrested my brother, Rudy. It had been a good night for the Auxiliary Hero Corps, but Daphnia wasn't dumb. She had learned from her mistake and this time she was going to ignite our city in hate and fear.

"I'm okay," I say to Queen Mab getting up from the ground. "This is fun."

"There's no one who can dowse this, but Daphnia. She is the true queen, but now she's gone. She starts the fires, but she never puts them out," says Mab pulling on my arm. "Her wagon-spokes are made of long spiders' legs. The cover is made of grasshoppers' wings. The harness is the smallest spider's web. The collars around their necks are made of thin moonbeams. Her whip is made of a cricket's bone. The lash is made of film. Her charioteer is a small gray mosquito. The Corps won't find her. The police can't find her. And she only appears in front of you when she wants. Even Queen Mab only spies her for a moment. The inferno has no need of the flame."

Queen Mab takes me to a safe place. It's a large oak tree. I can watch the battle, but I know which side I should help. Which side? I didn't know the answer to the question. I say to Mab, "I have heard that speech before, but where? I can't place it."

She gives me a deep throaty laugh and says, "Oh, you're another failure of the public schools. I have always thought an education institution should do a better job highlighting the classics."

The only thing I could say is, "Sorry. I know a few things, but nothing like you."

"Two houses? Two star-cross lovers? I don't have time for this. There's fight, and I'm not fighting. How sad is that for a queen?"

Queen Mab is finished with you. Time to fight, and then tonight it will be time for love. Maybe tonight Queen Mab will visit you, Val?"

I blush, and I still don't have much to say as politely as I can. "Ahh...no, thank you. You're highness, I think you can find much better suitor than me."

"Such is the loneliness of the royals." With that Mab turns and leaves. She runs back into the fight and leaves me standing underneath the tree.

I look for Smokey. I spot him. The bear is knocking down protesters with the back of his paws. Mostly the other side opposing him just runs out of his way. Who wants to mix it up with Smokey? I like to call him when he's like this, in Spanish, *Oso Viejo*, the old bear. He's big and fierce, and nobody wants to mess with him. I know Smokey. He might be angry, but he's taking it easy on them. I don't think even Spike and I could stand up to him when he's full of fur.

The police march forward with their shields. They are still banging on them with their batons. When they reach within feet of the rioters, they lock their shields and form a wall. I had read about this technique once, at the police were using the time-honored fighting method called the 'shield wall.' The ancient technique seems to work just as well for our police. They stacked their long shield against the ground in groups of three. One shield in front protecting the police from the protester directly in front of them. All of the shields form a wall in front of the angry mob, and the protesters can't get through it. It's impressive. Rocks and bottle strike the shields. The police line holds and the rioters can't do anything to them for now.

The only one not protected with the shields is Smoky, and the protesters attack him. The bear is in between the police and the mob, and he's got no place to go. How did this happen? Since they can't hurt the cops, they take their anger out on the bear. A new volley of bottles and rocks fly towards him and many of them strike him. A beer bottle breaks against his head, and Smokey turns and growls in the direction it came.

I hold my breath.

This encourages the crowd and now all of them start throwing things at the bear. Smokey turns to retreat towards the police, and he charges their shields. The lines are firmly in place. They aren't going to let the bear through the wall. Smokey hits the wall at full speed. Half-dozen cops are thrown in the air like dolls.

It's time for me to act. I quickly take off my shirt. I need to get to Spike. He asleep. I should say he's really a tattoo, and he needs my touch so he can come to life. I get to him, and I touch my chest. He jumps out and lands on the ground. He looks at the fight in front of us, and my dog is ready. My dog will follow me into any fight.

I run across the lawn. There are those old trees again. I have never noticed the trees before today. Some of them are dying and it looks to me like the city has neglected this section of the park.

I hear a voice in my head, "Valentine." I stop running. It's eerie-creepy and old. I turn and look around. I don't see anyone. When I look towards the trees, I hear the voice again.

"Valentine."

I start moving again. I have doubts about what I heard. I look towards the trees, and I think I see Juliet with an old man. I hear the voice one last time.

"Valentine, I have Juliet."

## FIVE

‘Everyone has their fate and the more people try to avoid it, the more trouble they get into. Just hop away like a kangaroo.’

-From King Lear 2 the Electric Disco Play

IT'S easy to get into a fight; it's much harder getting out of it.

I hit the first protester attacking Smoky. He's not as big as me, but he's tough. In fact, he's tougher than any civilian should be. He's able to take my punch. My only advantage is he doesn't know how to fight. He telegraphs his moves. He steps and uses the same hand he's going to hit me with. I easily dodge it. I could have knocked him out with a few counter punches, but we aren't the only two here in the park. There are hundreds of rioters and all want to hit me, kick me, or throw things at me. Right now, the odds are one hundred to one against Smokey and me.

Spike comes to help. Bites the man's arm. Clamps his jaws down, and the man's no longer interested in fighting me. I order Spike to release him, and when free, the man runs back into the crowd.

Smokey is fighting off three rioters and two police officers. One of

the rioters is on his back. The bear is strong, but there are too many trying to hurt him.

There are too many variables out here. How can I help Smokey? Protect Spike? And watch my back? I move towards Smokey. This time, I need to fight the cops. Two of them are holding batons and shields, and they are looking to hurt me. Spike doesn't wait and he charges the nearest one. Out of nowhere, there's another dog, a police K-9, and the two of them are going at it each other. The police dog is trained, but he's still not a match for Spike. The other dog soon turns and runs. Instead of staying with me, Spike runs after him. This sucks. Spike is on his own, but I can help Smokey.

There is so much fighting. So much violence. The fight became something else. It became a dance. I had once gone to the ballet with my sister. There, the Sugar Plum Fairy leaped, spun, and made her way across the stage. Soon all the ballet company joined her and the dancers filled the stage. It was beautiful.

The same thing is happening here. Everyone had a part to play everyone moved with the grace and ease of a ballet dancer. We might not be dancers, but we knew where to move. The police moved forward. The rioters would retreat. The rioters would take their turn, and gain a few steps, and the police would fall back. The only two who hadn't rehearsed their parts were Smokey and me. That's why we had to fight both sides. There was a dance taking place and two of us didn't know what to do. We fought when we shouldn't, and retreated to the wrong side when we shouldn't have. We fought in a sea of violence, and the two of us were always swimming against the riptide. Smokey and I needed to get away.

I finally reach Smokey. He doesn't see me, and when I place my hand on his front haunch. He turns and growls at me. When he sees me, a look of relief comes over his bear face. Hey, this isn't the first time I've looked into his brown eyes. He knew he had one ally here, and that ally would always be me.

"Come on!" I say. "We need to get someplace safer." First, I would get Smokey out of harm's way, and then I would need to find Spike. I

think we are close enough to the same group of trees I had found shelter in earlier. I point to them. "Let's go over there!"

Smokey grunts and follows me.

I had done my duty. I had protected Smokey. When we reached safety, the bear walks away. He's finished. He'll go home, and I hope I'll see him tonight at the Templeton. We needed to part company now, but I didn't know if we'll ever be on the same side again. I glanced at him one more time. Smokey found a bench, changed back into human form, and sat down on it. He looked old, and I knew Smokey's days with the Corps were almost over. He might not be finished today or tomorrow, but he would quit soon. I could tell he's tired of his life in the Corps. His body couldn't take it any longer, and I knew he had lost his will also. The Corps had let him down and so had life. I felt bad for the bear, but there was nothing else I could do.

Smokey says to me, "I'm tired. I woke up so alive this morning, but I'm not alive any longer. I'm dead on my feet. I'm a walking corpse. I didn't mean for anyone to get hurt."

"There's nothing else we can do. The Corps can't help anyone here. Go home." I lie and say, "Things will look better in the morning." I would find him tonight. We would talk. I might even be able to make him laugh. I hoped he would go home. To eat some food. To get some sleep.

I still need to find Spike.

As the smoke clears so have most of the protesters. They leave. The energy is gone. The police arrest many of them. In the middle of the park, an ambulance drives towards us. A group of officers clears a path. I see where the vehicle goes. Police are giving first aid to someone who has fallen in the skirmish. I know who it is. It's Mercutio Jones. My friend. Queen Mab has fallen. I move towards her. Some of the cops recognize me and they let me through. The paramedics are performing CPR on her, but everyone knows she's dead. They load her body into the ambulance and the white vehicle drives away. More ambulances are coming, and many of the protesters and cops will need to go the hospital. The park is littered

bodies and trash everywhere, and hopefully, the bodies will be collected first.

My dog? Where's Spike? Fear grips me. I'm worried. Have you ever lost a pet? I could only think of one thing worse. Losing a child. Spike isn't a child. He's only my dog, but we're still close. We're friends. I scan the park. There's no sign of him. I remember the direction he went when he chased the police dog.

I walk to the edge of the park. There are even more people standing around. Some of them were protesters. Some of them were spectators. They all seem like they're actors waiting offstage. And they are waiting for their cue before they make their entrance into the next scene. Nobody wants to leave because they want to see what will happen next. Will there be another clash with the cops?

I see my dog. Spike is on a leash, and a woman on top of a small hill at the park's edge is holding his tether. The woman has her back turn to me. Is it Juliet? Could it be her?



## SIX

‘What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon.’

-Leo of House DiCaprio

IT STARTS TO RAIN, but I’m sure. It’s not a hard rain. Neither is it a gentle one. It’s enough rain that I got wet, but it wasn’t enough for a shower. There is something you hope the rain will wash away, but I never want the image of Juliet washed from my mind. I hope the Rains of Castamere will never find me. Where am I?

The woman turns towards me. I look. She’s still beautiful. It’s Juliet. It’s unreal, but I don’t care. I want to get closer to her.

I hate to admit that I’m the kind who falls in love at first sight, but I am. And if you saw her you would fall in love with her too. Juliet had leashed my dog, Spike wasn’t going any place. Maybe he has fallen in love with her too. I always knew he was smart. Spike doesn’t even wag his tail when he finally notices me. Right now he sure wasn’t my best friend.

"Is this your dog?" says Juliet to me knowing the answer. She is holding a piece of the robe she is using as Spike's leash. My dog doesn't like them, but he's under her spell too. She says, "He is such a handsome dog I hate for him to get lost out here."

I only could nod my head. How could I speak? Could Da Vinci speak when he first saw Mona Lisa on the streets of Florence? As soon as she found out he was mine she handed me back his leash. I'm finally I'm able to croak out a few words and I say, "Thank you." I think I will always fall in love with her each time I see her.

A smile fills her lips and my Juliet says teasing me, "I know your name. Is it Valentine Vega? Isn't it?" She couldn't look any prettier if she wanted to. I know I'm stupid because I'm in love. Maybe it's me. I seem to fall in love too easily all the time.

Do I dare reach out and touch her hand?

Juliet says, "I have to go now, but I'm glad I got to talk to you. I want to give you this." I don't know what she wants to hand me. I know you're shy; I think that's really cute." Some of her hair has fallen across the front of her face. The part that covers her left eye she brushes it away with her hand. "Maybe...when you're not so shy you could give me a call sometimes?"

Some sounds come out of my mouth, but I know they aren't words.

I wake up.

Daphnia is kneeling next to me. She slaps me in the face again.

I say, "I'm awake." She has Spike; he's safe. I look around for Juliet. She's not there any longer. It had been a dream. I'm disappointed.

Daphnia says, "You passed out, Sweet Hips. But we are in trouble. The Soulless Snare must be near. He knows your weakness. It's a good thing I found you. The Snare has many traps for those who venture too close to his woods, and he nearly got you, but I think you're safe now."

I stand up.

She gives me an all-knowing look and asks, "Who were you dreaming about? Was it that other girl?"

I nod my head.

"So, let's go save your girlfriend. She's in danger. I hope we aren't too late."

## SEVEN

‘These violent delights have violent ends.’

-Again, Shakespeare or is it Tupac? Sometimes I get the two of them confused.

I CAN SEE the Soulless Snare is sitting on a stump after we walk fifty yards into the glade surrounded by pine trees. He has Juliet with him. He’s killing her. He’s taking her soul. He doesn’t seem too concerned about us, and in the fading light, I can see he isn’t even looking at us. He’s looking upwards at the branches of the trees. I touch the sword tattoo on my arm. It comes to life.

After a few moments, he says, “Do you hear the birds? Did you know there are two ways to kill songbirds? One way is to shoot them out of the branches. It takes longer, but it’s much more satisfying.” He looks down at us and smiles.

Daphnia say, “What’s the other way?”

He replies, “Wait in the same place long enough and the little birds will eventually come to you. That’s what I have done. You have come to me. It has taken awhile, but I’m much more satisfied than I

actually am. The long wait has made me so hungry. Some of the most delicious songbirds in the city have just flown into my lap, and now what should I do the you three of you? Should I let you birds fly free, or should I greedily devour you? It's such a big decision for me to make so quickly."

The Soulless Snare is an old man. He could be any old man sitting on a park bench. The kind no one looks at or cares about because they think they are harmless and have no value. The Soulless Snare is no one, but as I can look closer, I can see he's deadly. He's so deadly, and I know I have never faced a foe like this before.

Daphnia laughs and says, "Listen, I think you should be much more afraid of us. Sugar, we might not let you live...have you thought about that? Do I look like anyone's caged bird?" This bird might actually rip you apart with her talons."

The Soulless Snare laughs and says, "It's always the prettiest birds that make the most noise. I was hoping to eat you last, but maybe I should eat your soul first. I only wished you could share the pleasure I shall take away from you...I look forward to chewing on your soul's bones."

There's a smell in the oldest part of a forest. All of them in their darkest parts smell like death and rot. This is the way it smelled in this place. I could smell it all through the dampness. I shift on my feet. I'm uncomfortable here, it's the Soulless Snare's home, but there's no choice. We're going to have to fight for our lives.

Yellow eyes look at me from the trees. The dark hides everything, but their eyes. Soon one of them howls, and soon the pack howls.

The Snare laughs when he hears them, and the howls send a shiver up my spine. I attack. I rush forward. I hold my sword up high, and I'm hoping to land a hard blow when I reach him.

He's ready for me. He calls his hounds. They rush me from the shadows. Four legs are faster than two. I have to fight the hounds first. I take two of them out. A half-dozen more are on me. The creatures once were dogs, but now they're only nightmares. They knock me down.

Spike is the first one top of me. He's defending me. He gives me the seconds I need to get back to my feet.

I hear a cannon go off next to my head. It's not a cannon, but Daphnia's firing the biggest pistol I have ever seen. I can't hear, and I'm not sideways by the blast. Where was she hiding that hand cannon?

She's yelling at the hounds. "Do you feel lucky, Punks? This is a .44 Magnum it's the most powerful handgun in the world." She kills four more and her last shot hits a large dog in the head and taking it off. After she's finished shooting all of her rounds, I can't hear, but I still have enough hearing left to know she's out of rounds. Now the three of us are fighting the hounds by hand. I think the dogs have taken a pound of my flesh as my punishment for coming here. But in the end, there's only one left, and when he see he's outnumbered, he runs away.

I look at Spike first and he's okay, and then I look at Daphnia and she's okay too. It's nice to have her fighting on my side again. Between the three of us, we are all bruised, battered, and beat up, but we still can fight.

The Soulless Snare doesn't seem to care. He's still too involved with Juliet. I fear he is almost finished taking her soul and then she'll soon be dead. Satan's Grove is still his domain. We have to hurry if I'm going to save Juliet.

I run forward. Spike follows. I ready my sword.

The Snare finally looks up from Juliet. The old man puts up his hand for protection. I hear Spike yelp. He's knocked down. I'm about to strike him and he says, "There's nothing you can do. I have taken her soul. It is complete." Juliet rolls off of his lap, and she's laying face down on the ground. I change my plan. I go to her instead. The Snare laughs. He has won. He stands up to face me. Now, I still have three more souls to take. This day is going better than I have ever expected." He stands.

The snare is hit by a bullet. It's Daphnia and her cannon. The Snare flies backward, but he still stays on his feet. He looks shocked.

Daphnia says, "Bitch, I'll smack ya up your dumb ass. Next time, I'm going to curb stomp ya face instead." I think she's mad.

I look at Juliet quickly. Do I need to take her to the hospital? And what about Spike?

Daphnia shouts at me, "There's still time to take it back, but first, we need to kill him before he gets away."

## EIGHT

'Reality is wrong. Dreams are for real.'

-Tupac

THE SNARE LOOKS AT ME. He's not defeated, and he knows it. He slowly walks towards me. He continues to look at me, and he raises his arms.

I stop, and I can feel a blast of wind. It comes from behind and hits me in the face. I'm stopped in my tracks. I can barely hold onto my sword.

It's Daphnia who makes her way forward against the wind. The Snare's blast is so strong it kicks up dirt, leaves, and twigs that hit the both of us in the face. She doesn't care. She dodges a large tree limb that comes at her. I recover. I still can't hit him with my sword. The blast of air becomes stronger. It stings my face, and I have to squint. I'm close enough. I take a swing, but I only hit the air. The Snare isn't there. He's standing a few feet away. He's closer to Daphnia now. She tries to hit him, but he's gone when her fist reaches his face, he disappears. He laughs when he reappears. This old man is annoying.



He's closer to me now, but instead of swinging my sword. I throw instead. It surprises the Snare, but he disappears again.

The wind stops, and it's quiet in the grove. Where is he? The Snare reappears. But this time he's pulling the blade of my sword out of his gut. I got lucky. He closer to Daphnia, and as he takes out of his body. He's not laughing anymore, but the Snare has my weapon, and he's going to use it against Daphnia.

There are others here. It's Smokey and the Fat Crow. Smoky is much faster than the Crow. He's in his bear form, and the old brown bear reaches the Snare first.

The Snare attention is focused on Daphnia. He takes a swing at her. He misses. Daphnia backs away. She sees Smokey. The bear charges the Snare and knocks him down. The bear mauls the villain. He uses his claws to rip the Snare's flesh from his bone. The Snare screams. Smokey is going to kill the villain.

The Crow reaches us. He stands by me. He's out of breath.

There's another sound. It's lifeless roar. It's Smokey. The bear falls to his side. I see the sword's blade sticking out of him. He's motionless.

The Snare is lying on the ground, and he's laughing. He's a mess. His blood everywhere. "My last soul and it's the soul of a bear. I have taken two souls away from you today. I'm going to die with two more souls. I've defeated you." The old man coughs and blood comes out of his mouth.

My former friend takes the sword out of Smoky and walks over to the Soulless Snare.

I yell, "Don't!"

It's too late. She pushes my blade into the old man's chest.

"Why?" I ask. "It's not our way."

Daphnia says after she's made sure his dead, "But it's *My Way!*"

## NINE

'My Soul is in the Sky'

-A Midsummer's Night Dream

TATTOOS ARE a poor substitute for people. I'm lying on my stomach, and the Fat Crow is working on my back. It hurts, but all tattoos hurt.

The Crow is making two new ones. He's taking his time. He wants to make them perfect. He says to me, "Do you want to see?" I think I got a mirror someplace.

"No, I trust you." I have been quiet for the past two weeks. I have only spoken to Crow and my Grandmother. I guess they are the closest in my life since Smokey and Juliet died in Satan's Grove.

Smokey was buried in with full honors from the Auxiliary Hero Corps. All of the Corps was there, and many of our city's officials were there also. Was he perfect? I know he wasn't, but I wished he were still alive.

Spike licks my face. He is worried and bored. I know he wants to

go outside and play, but he smart enough to know I need to stay here for a little longer.

I didn't get to attend Juliet's funeral. Her family didn't want me there. Her two brothers showed up to see me. They told me the family blamed me for her death, and it would be better for her family if I didn't show my face near their mother and father ever again.

"I made it into the Corps. I'm going to be a hero just like you," says Crow. "Once I finish my training, maybe I'll get to work with you someday."

"I don't feel like a hero," I say. The tattoo needle pricks a sensitive area, and I grimace.

"You're a hero. They're saying you're vital to the safety of our city and a bunch of other cool stuff...ya know good things. I'm almost finished your new tats. Come back in a few days and I'll finish them up for you. They're going to look good. They might even be my best tattoos yet."

Daphnia disappeared. She must have gone back to one her secret hiding places. I hoped she might show up for Smokey's funeral, but she didn't. She's too smart. I know she cared for Smokey, but she knew she would get arrested if she showed her face. She was a criminal, but she had saved my life. I wouldn't arrest her, but there are others who would. I know I'll see her again.

Crow asks, "Do you want to give them a try?"

I'm surprised, and I say, "They're ready. I didn't think I could until you finish them. If it's your best work, I had better take a look at them. I find a mirror and turn where I can see them. They are big, take up most of my back, and the Crow is right, they really are his best work. My wings are beautiful."

Crow says, "One wing for Smokey. One wing for Juliet."

I reach around and touch my back. First, I touch the left tattoo, and then the right. They come to life. I make the effort to fly. It's clumsy, but my wings lift me off the ground.

"You're going to be a Flyer. I told you so. A true superhero some-

day. One of the very few. And I'm going to tell everyone I made your wings for you," says Crow proudly.

I return to the Earth. Spike is wagging his tail at me. He approves. I say to myself quoting Tupac, "Things will never be the same, that's just the way it is." Was it Tupac, or was it Shakespeare? I don't know.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles Eugene ‘Chuck’ Anderson is a poet, painter, baker, runner, hospital volunteer, and writer who lives in Colorado. He spends most of his days with his pup, Champ. Chuck is a husband and father, and he has a weakness for muscle cars.

In 2017, he has worked and published the novel, *Europa Nightmare*, with Wayne Faust. Also put out the novella’s *Daphnia Fights Back*, and *Europa Ghost Story*, again with Wayne Faust. He was lucky enough to put together six collections this year with some amazing authors: *Steam*, *Ghosts* *Phantoms* *Wraiths*, *Capes* *Masks* *Spandex*, *Battles For the Night*, *Watching the Detectives*, *Dystopia*, *Sunset with Her*, and *Guns of the West*.

Chuck is currently working on a new anthology, Edward Bryant: *Spheres of Influence* with Jim Lemay and hopes to include many stories from authors Edward Bryant helped over the years.

Finally, Chuck is wrapping up writing a historical mystery, *Traitor’s Rose*, which is long overdue for his very patient publishers at Fireship Books. Chuck’s website is at [www.charleseugeneanderson.com](http://www.charleseugeneanderson.com)

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"TO ERR IS HUMAN; TO FORGIVE,  
DIVINE"

Hello Friend-

The words above were written by Alexander Pope. If you find a mistake, I apologize. I didn't make them on purpose. Some of them will appear, and I really should know better. Some of them will appear, and I really missed them because you are wiser than me. When I say, I truly try to eliminate all of those punctuation and grammar demons.

Favor- if you see one, please forgive me. And if you feel like it, please let me know about any of my mistakes.

You can email me at [charleseugeneanderson@yahoo.com](mailto:charleseugeneanderson@yahoo.com).

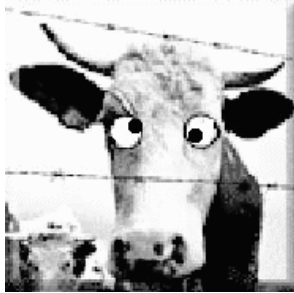
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